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Studying refugee settlement through longitudinal research: methodological and ethical insights from the Good Starts study

Celia McMichael, Caitlin Nunn, Sandra M. Gifford and Ignacio Correa-Velez

Abstract

Research involving resettled refugees raises methodological and ethical complexities. These complexities typically emerge within cross-sectional research that focuses on refugee experiences at a specific point in time. Given the long-term and dynamic nature of refugee settlement, longitudinal research is valuable, yet it raises distinct complexities within the research process. This article focuses on the methodological and ethical insights that emerged in a longitudinal study of settlement and wellbeing with a cohort of young people from refugee backgrounds in Australia. It considers: engagement and retention of a cohort over time; the need to adapt research tools to changing settlement contexts and life-stages; participants' experiences of long-term involvement in the study; and the challenge of timely translation of findings into evidence for policy and practice. The paper contributes to a growing understanding of the practical, ethical and epistemological challenges and opportunities presented by longitudinal research, in this case, with resettled refugee background youth.

Key words: methodology, ethics, refugee youth, refugee settlement, longitudinal research, informed consent

Introduction

Research involving resettled people from refugee backgrounds raises many methodological and ethical complexities. Researchers have discussed, for example: the role of collaborative and participatory approaches (Ellis et al. 2007; Dyregrov et al. 2000; van Blerk and Ansell 2006); reducing power inequalities between researchers and study participants (Doná 2007; Miller 2004); negotiating informed consent (Ellis et al. 2007; Mackenzie et al. 2007); and, balancing methodological neutrality with policy relevance (Jacobsen and Landau 2003). However, these complexities are typically framed within the context of cross-sectional research projects that focus on refugee experiences at a specific point in time (Bermudez 2013; Colic-Peisker 2009; Montgomery and Foldspang 2008; Morantz et al. 2013).

In this article we focus on the methodological and ethical insights that emerged in a *longitudinal* study of settlement and wellbeing with a cohort of young people from refugee backgrounds in Australia. Given the long-term and dynamic nature of refugee settlement, longitudinal research with refugee populations in a host country is important. Cross-sectional research cannot do justice to the shifting challenges and adjustments of settlement across time (Beiser 2009). Longitudinal studies provide information about changes over time, and documenting these changes is particularly relevant to understanding settlement experiences and outcomes (Beiser 2006; Hugo 2011; Steel et al. 2004). Yet few studies with refugee populations have adopted a longitudinal approach (Richardson et al. 2004; Pythian et al. 2009; Valtonen 1999). Longitudinal studies with children and youth are also important given the substantial transitions of these life stages (Thomson and Holland 2003; Wyn and Andres 2011) and the association of early experiences with outcomes in later life (e.g. health, education, employment) (Gemici et al. 2013; National Statistics 2011). While longitudinal research with refugee background young people is of value, it must pay close attention to methodological and ethical issues for this particular cohort.

This paper examines key sites of learning that arose in a longitudinal research project with a young refugee cohort. It provides a brief description of the research methods (see Gifford et al. 2007 for more extensive discussion). The paper then considers four key methodological and ethical areas of learning for this longitudinal study. First, it discusses retention of refugee participants over the duration of the study, considering both the challenges and key methods for retaining refugee participants over time. Second, it considers the importance of adapting research tools across different waves of the study, and highlights the need for tools to be responsive and appropriate to both settlement contexts and life-stages. Third, it explores participants' experiences of their long-term involvement in the study, with particular focus on how participation contributed to settlement processes. Fourth, it discusses the challenge for longitudinal research of timely translation of findings into evidence for policy and practice. While there were a plethora of other ethical and methodological issues, the scope of this paper is defined by its focus on those areas of

learning that were linked specifically to the longitudinal nature of the study. The paper contributes to a growing understanding of the practical, ethical and epistemological challenges and opportunities presented by longitudinal mixed-method research, in this case, with young people who have a refugee background.

Background to the Study: Methods and Rationale

In 2004, a cohort of young people with refugee backgrounds were recruited into the 'Good Starts' study during their first year in Australia. The aim of the study was to better understand how to support settlement for young people with refugee backgrounds, with a particular focus on outcomes over time (Gifford et al. 2009). The study aimed to involve at least 10% of the 802 humanitarian arrivals in Melbourne in 2003 aged between 10 and 19 years (DIMIA 2005). Participants were recruited through English Language Schools/Centres (ELS/C) that provide intensive English language education to newly arrived students, before they make the transition into mainstream schools. The schools provided a practical solution for recruitment, as many new school-age arrivals initially spend 6 to 12 months in these institutions (i.e. around 40% of primary-age and over 70% of secondary-age refugee new arrivals) (DEECD 2011). The sample is representative of those young refugee arrivals who enter education via an ELS/C, and not those who start education without intensive language support or who do not attend schools as they fall outside the compulsory schooling ages (6 to 17 years in Victoria). 120 young people (55 female, 65 male) were recruited, and at first interview, they ranged in age from 11 to 19 years and their average length of time in Australia was 5.6 months (see Table 1). They came from 12 different countries and, except for a slight over-representation of Sudanese youth, the group closely resembled the population of young refugees arriving in Australia between 2003 and 2006 in terms of country of birth and gender (DIBP 2014).

Four annual waves of data collection were conducted over 2004 to 2008. Quantitative measures were used to examine psychosocial health and settlement outcomes, while qualitative methods were used to generate a richer picture of the contexts and processes that influence settlement and wellbeing. Young people compiled 'Settlement Journals' that included a mixture of visual, quantitative and qualitative data. For example, they completed questionnaires (that included internationally validated items to measure housing status, education, self-esteem, family relationships, health status etc.), participated in qualitative interviews, took photos, and were invited to draw pictures of themselves in the present and in the future (see Gifford et al. 2007). This mix of methods sought to describe the settlement experience using qualitative and ethnographic methods and to provide quantitative evidence of settlement and wellbeing (Hines 1993; Maton 1993; Powles 2004): that is, it aimed to 'generate both meaning and measurement' (Gifford et al. 2007: 418). The research was initially conducted in groups in ELS/Cs with intense support from researchers, bicultural aides and interpreters, and later through one-to-one or small group sessions with

a researcher and without need of interpreters as participants' English language literacy increased.

In 2012-13, a fifth wave of data collection was carried out which extended the 'Good Starts' study by re-contacting participants around eight to nine years after their initial interview. It aimed to examine how the cohort had negotiated the transition to early adulthood, given the demands of initial settlement, with specific focus on education, employment, social inclusion, and local and transnational family networks. This re-engagement with the cohort was of value given the lack of research which examines the longer term experiences of refugees, and refugee young people in particular (Refugee Council of Australia 2010; Smyth et al. 2010). The primary research methods consisted of an in-depth interview and a short questionnaire. The in-depth interviews provided descriptions of young adults' longer-term experiences of settlement, and included discussion of transitions to early adulthood such as experiences of tertiary education and employment, and return visits to countries of origin. The questionnaire (a shorter version of the questionnaires used in 'Good Starts' waves 1-4) gathered data on settlement, health and wellbeing. Data collection occurred in settings chosen by participants: e.g. homes, local libraries, and tertiary education settings. All interviews were conducted in English.

The study is one of very few longitudinal studies to have been conducted with young refugees internationally (Bean et al. 2007; Due et al. 2013; Montgomery 2008; Rousseau et al. 2004; Sack et al. 1993). Three longitudinal studies have examined predictors of mental health and psychological distress among refugee youth in sites of settlement (Bean et al. 2007; Montgomery, 2008; Sack et al. 1993). Due et al. (2013) conducted a longitudinal study of educational experiences of migrant and refugee youth in Australia. And Rousseau et al. (2004) conducted a mixed-method longitudinal study of family separation and reunification among resettled refugee families in Canada, which included interviews with young family members. While these longitudinal studies with refugee youth (and their families) provide important findings that examine change over time in the context of settlement, each has a specific area of focus (i.e. mental health, education, family). The Good Starts longitudinal study, however, examined refugee settlement experiences and focused on inter-linking elements of settlement, wellbeing and integration (Ager and Strang 2008; Smyth et al. 2010). It is important to note that, while longitudinal in design, the study focused on only one segment of the 'forced migration-settlement' experience – the early settlement years. Prior experiences of war, displacement, asylum and transit emerged as critical contexts to settlement experiences, but the study did not directly study these phases.

Recruiting, Retaining and Recontacting Participants

A critical concern in longitudinal research is retention of participants over each wave of data collection. In order to maintain the validity of study results, it is crucial to retain a high

percentage of participants and the conventional (although contested) standard is that at least 70% of the original sample should be retained (Yeterian et al. 2012). Participant retention is, however, particularly difficult when researching resettled young people with refugee backgrounds. Resettled refugee populations are highly mobile. Rates of secondary migration following initial settlement are high, as individuals and families pursue employment, affordable and appropriate housing, and access to ethnic community networks (Taylor and Stanovic 2005). Moreover, young people from refugee backgrounds bear the traces of their refugee pasts and face a complex and dynamic set of practical and psychosocial demands as they negotiate settlement, which may limit their willingness to commit to ongoing participation in a longitudinal study.

The Good Starts Study was designed to address these challenges and encourage retention. It achieved an overall retention of 91% in wave 2, 83% in wave 3, 67% in wave 4, and 43% in wave 5 (see Table 1). The recruitment strategies and research methods aimed to establish good relationships and trust between the research team and participants in order to both support positive research experiences and good retention rates (see also Crivello et al. 2009; Due et al. 2013; Harrison et al. 2001, Trainor and Ahlgren Bouchard 2013). For example, recruitment occurred through ELS/C where potential participants had developed a sense of belonging and security; the Good Starts logo and distinct graphic design for project materials supported participants' connection to the study; regular communication occurred regarding upcoming data collection; and annual newsletters were disseminated that reported key findings and utilised participants' drawings and words (see Gifford et al. 2009). Accordingly, over waves 1-4, participants developed a high level of familiarity with the study and retention rates were reasonable.

As anticipated, in the fifth wave we achieved a lower overall retention rate of 43% of the original cohort of 120 (see Table 1). A number of key issues affected retention: the four-to-five year gap between the wave four interview (2007/08) and the wave five interview (2012/13); many participants had left secondary schools, which previously provided a consistent point of contact; the high degree of mobility as people changed houses and relocated for work/study; unstable experiences of further education and un/under-employment; and changing mobile phone numbers and periods of disconnection or lack of phone credit. Some participants expressed scepticism about our ability to find other participants. As one young Ethiopian man said: *'Because even me, I almost lost my mobile number, how you're going to find me now? Then I get it back, that number again. But in case – like how are you going to search for me now, if you didn't get my number?'* Nonetheless, 64 participants were successfully contacted. The large majority were contacted through the detailed contact information previously collected, particularly via landline phone and mobile phone, and also through the telephone of family/friends and email. A few participants were contacted via other participants, including siblings. Facebook also offered a valuable way of recontacting this group: participants were identified using a public search and were then

contacted using the private message function through a Good Starts account that used the project logo as the profile image. In response to being recontacted, many participants' were friendly and informal. One Sudanese young man responded via Facebook: 'I do remember good starts it been so long how r yous any way' [sic]. This highlights the value of maintaining and developing reliable and diverse avenues of communication over time.

Of the 64 participants who were contacted, 51 agreed to participate. A comparative analysis between wave one (n=120) and wave five (n=51) participants shows no statistically significant differences in terms of gender ($p=0.702$), region of birth ($p=0.365$) and number of years of schooling prior to arrival in Australia ($p=0.707$). In wave 5, 13 of the contactable participants 'declined' to participate: six explained that they were too busy, the other seven did not respond to follow-up communication and no explanation for non-participation was provided. Yet even among those who did participate, their daily lives involved multiple pursuits including work, study, job-seeking and caring for a child or parent. Accordingly, there were no discernible factors that determined (non-)participation. Other studies with adolescents have documented that those lost to follow-up are more likely than 'study completers' to be involved in drug use and 'deviant' behaviour, get in trouble at school, and have poorer academic results (Yeterian et al, 2012). In this study, it was uncertain whether those who were 'lost to follow up' – i.e. not contactable or declined further participation - differed significantly in their settlement trajectories from those who participated.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

While retention is central to the validity of longitudinal studies, ongoing consultation is important to ascertain whether participants genuinely want to remain involved. There is growing recognition that research participation on the basis of 'informed consent' is complex and should be a continuous process, not a one-off agreement (Crow et al. 2006; Holland et al. 2006; Hugman et al. 2011). This is particularly true when gaining informed consent from children (Ebrahim 2010; France et al. 2000; Saldana 2003) and refugees (Block et al. 2012). In this study, standard procedures in relation to gaining informed consent were followed, as outlined by institutional ethical guidelines (e.g. consent was sought from carers of minors, verbal and/or written consent was sought from participants, information sheets were translated into relevant languages). Consent was not assumed on the basis of prior participation, but was sought at each wave of data collection. It was also essential to be responsive to the nuances of consent dynamics (Gifford 2013a), including reluctance to participate in certain aspects of data collection (e.g. drawing future selves) or more subtle means of declining such as initially indicating willingness to participate, but then explaining they were too busy at planned points of data collection. These issues have been highlighted

by other researchers who critically examine the capacity of young refugees to give informed consent (see Block et al. 2012; Due et al. 2013; Ebrahim 2010). This study underscores the importance of ongoing 'situated' ethical practice in longitudinal studies with young people with refugee backgrounds

Dynamic Lives, Dynamic Methods

Longitudinal research requires consistency in the content of research tools, in order ensure that the data from each wave are analytically comparable (Due et al. 2013). It is also important to consider whether participants are using the same conceptual constructs to respond to questions over time (i.e. longitudinal validity) (Ployhart and Vandenburg 2010). However, there has been a lack of critical discussion of the fact that longitudinal studies can include cohorts who traverse life stages, and for whom different research questions and methods may be appropriate at different points in time. This need for responsive and appropriate research questions and methods is amplified in longitudinal research with young people from refugee backgrounds as they experience both shifting settlement experiences and changing life-stages (i.e. childhood, adolescence, early adulthood).

This project used quantitative, qualitative and ethnographic research methods to examine settlement. A central area of learning was the need to adapt research tools as the cohort traversed different settlement and life stages, while still allowing for longitudinal analysis. All young people were recruited in their first year of arrival and, accordingly, over the duration of the project had very similar lengths of residence in Australia. However, over the course of the study, they moved through different life stages in terms of (for example) family relationships, education, employment, social inclusion, independence, and marital and parental status (Correa-Velez et al. 2010; Gifford et al. 2009; McMichael et al. 2011; Sampson and Gifford 2010). Many of these transitions were amplified by the settlement context as young people also experienced changes to their English literacy, sense of belonging to settlement country and homeland, and their ethnic self-identification.

First, the design of the research tools required sensitivity to the changing age and life-stage of participants. The questionnaire included items that were consistently collected over each wave (e.g. educational attainment, English literacy, experience of discrimination), yet some items required adaptation. For example, the questionnaire used the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status to assess participants' own rating of their social status (Adler et al. 2000). The tool uses drawings of a ladder with ten rungs as a visual 10-point scale: people mark the rung that best represents their social status relative to others. The study used a modified version of the youth-specific ladders (see Goodman et al. 2001) and assessed social reference groups of significance to the cohort: (i) individual placement in the school community (ii) familial placement within their ethnic community, and (iii) familial placement within the wider Australian community (Correa-Velez et al. 2010). However, given that many participants in wave 5 were no longer at school or dependent on their families, the wave 5

questionnaire also included adult versions of the social status ladders and assessed individual placement within (i) the wider Australian community, (ii) their ethnic community, and (iii) the workplace. So, while many items in the questionnaire were not age specific and could be readily applied and analysed longitudinally (e.g. self-reported health status), others required some re-orientation. The need for adaptable research tools is common to all longitudinal research in which participants traverse different life stages. However, this need is intensified by the circumstances associated with refugee settlement, as research tools must be able to capture the dynamic nature of settlement experiences, including changing employment paths, educational opportunities, income status, identity, and social inclusion.

Second, there were changes to the emphasis placed on different research methods at the various waves of data collection in response to changing settlement experience. Due to the limited English literacy of the cohort in their early years of settlement, some forms of methodological engagement were better-suited during these first waves. In the first wave, both time and assistance were required to complete the Settlement Journals. Data were collected in short weekly class-room sessions, over eight to ten weeks, and students were divided into language groups that then worked with a bicultural worker, interpreter, or multicultural education aide to complete the activities. The quantitative questionnaire was central to data collection, and was completed with the assistance of researchers.

Participants were also closely assisted in writing short statements and completing drawings (e.g. of their future selves) in their Settlement Journal. Photographs were included as a means of generating visual data on social support and connections to place (Sampson and Gifford 2010), with participants asked for example to take photos of important people in their lives and their favourite place in their home or school. One of the benefits of using this visual tool is that young people with limited literacy could participate and the visual data provided an anchor for discussion thus making the research process more collaborative (Crivello et al. 2009). However, as the cohort gained English literacy and increased in age, their engagement with various research methods shifted as participants' focus shifted from the visual (e.g. photos, drawings) to written and verbal descriptions. The project fostered a supportive environment in which participants could engage with researchers and practice and develop their English literacy (Gifford et al. 2007), and the range of research activities supported participants' interest and engagement in the project (see also Due et al. 2013; Crivello et al. 2009). The multi-method approach recognised that the cohort had a broad range of abilities and preferences for expression, and that these changed over time.

In 'wave 5', given the substantially increased English language literacy, and the anticipated difficulties of recontacting participants, the project was reoriented towards qualitative interviews with their focus on richness of data above sample size and representativeness. Qualitative methods are of value for research with young people from refugee backgrounds who are experiencing substantial changes to the social and cultural context of their everyday lives. Participants were able to narrate their recollections of displacement and early settlement, current experiences of longer-term settlement and everyday life, and their

future aspirations. It was possible to examine these narratives in ways that foregrounded temporality, contradictions and change, and to consider the ongoing 'sense-making' about lived experiences of settlement and life transitions (Henwood and Lang 2003; Holland et al. 2006; Thomson and Holland, 2003).

Interestingly, the qualitative longitudinal data alternately supported or contradicted previous responses as participants' everyday lives and hopes were discussed from different temporal vantage points. Senay, for example, is a young Eritrean man who arrived in Australia at the age of 12 with his father and brothers. In his first year of arrival, he went to an ELS/C, and while worried by not having a stable family home and his father being unemployed, he indicated that he was 'very happy' and that his life was 'getting much better'. In this first year, he wrote: 'I like school which will make my future safe and make me get job which make my family proud of me and make god happy'. However, eight years later, upon reflecting back on the first year of settlement, Senay said:

To be honest, I wasn't, I wasn't really happy. This whole time it was a façade, you know. Maybe it was because of my insecurities or whatever. Whatever the reason was, it was just an act that I would do, you know: I'm excited, I'm bubbly, bang, bang. I wasn't really happy. I never felt, you know, joy. So now the only thing that's changed is that I've stopped pretending to be happy. When I'm happy I'm happy, when I'm not happy I'm not happy, that's it.

As this example illustrates, participants' experiences were differently narrated, reinterpreted and contradicted at different points in time (Lewis 2007). However, inconsistencies in people's responses at each wave of data collection were not only related to accuracy of 'narrating' and 'remembering'. Responses were also revised as participants developed new perspectives on particular conceptual themes of interest. For example, the questionnaire asked participants to define their ethnicity (i.e. 'in terms of my ethnic group, I consider myself to be . . .'). When ethnicity was explored through qualitative interviews it became evident that the self-definition of ethnicity changed over time, either losing or increasing significance, or requiring explanation as to emerging and multiple sites of ethnic belonging. It is well-established that migration is associated with changing identities, as many migrants initially experience strengthening of 'homeland' cultural identities, often followed by the formation of multiple and fluid forms of identity and belonging (Tartakovsky 2009). In this study, participants' interpreted research questions focusing on ethnicity from the shifting vantage point of their own experiences of ethnicity and identity. Further, changing or inconsistent responses sometimes reflected the broader politics and realities of immigration regulations. For example, under the humanitarian migration criteria, only certain family members can be resettled via family reunion programs (i.e. nuclear family members) (McDonald-Wilmsen and Gifford 2009). Accordingly, a family member defined as 'mum' in year one could later be referred to as 'auntie', as participants settled into original

family relationships rather than those that were otherwise defined in order to meet humanitarian migration regulations.

This highlights the need to be attuned to the fact that questions are responded to in different ways over time, depending on settlement and life-stage and broader social and political contexts. It is important to develop research methods that are appropriate across life stages, and that can be adapted to suit changing life-stages. In sum, it was essential to find a balance between the standardisation of research tools that allows comparison over time, and the flexibility required to examine and measure experiences across diverse life-stages and stages of settlement.

Participant Experiences of the Study

Social scientists pay attention to the impact of their presence on the data they collect and produce. The demise of the myth of objectivity has usefully drawn attention to the importance of relationships and ethics in engagement with research participants (Clifford and Marcus 1986, Trainor and Ahlgren Bouchard 2013, Warin 2011). Attention has been paid in particular to the impact of research on marginalised groups, including refugees and young people, leading to innovative developments in the epistemologies and methodologies applied in research with these populations (c.f. Boyden and Ennew 1997, O'Neill and Tobolewska 2002). Warin (2011) argues that research is more ethical if there is something in it for participants: e.g. financial recompense, use of participatory research tools, active collaboration that produces mutually advantageous outcomes (Trainor and Ahlgren Bouchard 2013).

Given participants' vulnerability as newly-arrived young people from refugee backgrounds, as well as the challenges they faced in resettlement, building ethical research relationships was a core concern in the design of Good Starts. As noted in an earlier article, research with young people with refugee backgrounds must not add further to the demands of settlement and should ideally contribute to positive settlement outcomes (Gifford et. al. 2007:2). In this study, efforts to contribute to positive settlement experience were integrated into a wide variety of processes and methods, including providing 'thank you' gifts for participation, and facilitating opportunities to develop English literacy through task-based methods (e.g. Settlement Journals). These gestures of reciprocity were particularly important given the longitudinal nature of the study, which meant that participants needed to remain engaged over a long period.

In both waves four and five of data collection, participants were asked to comment on their experience of participation in the study. Their responses were diverse but overwhelmingly positive, though it is important to note that these are the participants who chose to continue with the study. Participants identified a range of positive outcomes of their involvement, including interpersonal engagement, and opportunities to learn. Many valued

the tangible rewards of participation, such as receiving cinema tickets, taking and retaining photographs, completing and keeping their Settlement Journals, and (in wave 5) receiving a small payment (50AUD) in compensation for their time and participation. Several commented on more intangible benefits of reflecting on experiences and producing self-knowledge. For many, Good Starts was primarily experienced as 'just' a fun activity. Yet it is important not to undervalue this as an outcome given the many adversities negotiated by young people from refugee backgrounds both pre- and during settlement. Several arts-based research projects with young people from refugee backgrounds have similarly found fun to be an important outcome, as well as a determining factor in participation (c.f. Ramirez and Matthews 2008; Nunn 2010).

While structured by the research tasks, data collection sessions also provided opportunities for informal interaction. Interaction with researchers (members of the host society) was specifically identified by approximately one-third of participants as an important element of their participation in the project. During the study, young people talked with the researchers about homework, transition to mainstream secondary school, changing family relationships, boyfriends/girlfriends, and unplanned pregnancy. This type of interpersonal engagement between researchers and participants could be criticized for influencing participants' lives and undermining the objectivity of the findings. However, the study was underpinned by an ethical and moral commitment to contributing positively to the settlement experience in Australia (Gifford, 2103b). Indeed, given the many transitions experienced by resettled young people, their long-term engagement with the project and researchers provided a sense of ongoing social connection. Thus, reflecting on his eight year connection with the project, an Iraqi Assyrian young man told us:

It's good that you guys care about how we've [been] going since we came to Australia. Like, we really appreciate that. Otherwise no-one else would be caring about what we've been doing. It's a good thing.

That this relationship, albeit intermittent and involving different researchers over time, was interpreted by this young man as 'care' is indicative of both the strong relationship fostered between the project and participants and the value of bridging relationships between young people and members of the wider community. In the context of settlement, such bridging relationships – 'social connections with those of other national, ethnic or religious groups' (Ager and Strang 2004: 18) – play an important role in facilitating intergroup understanding and fostering a sense of belonging in the new country (Ager and Strang 2004; Beirens et al. 2007).

The research relationship was additionally recognised by participants as providing a safe space for sharing ideas and experiences. It allowed one Sudanese young man, for example, 'to express about myself or talk about things I never talk to anyone about'. While the creation of an 'exceptional situation for communication' in which such disclosure can occur is a common benefit of qualitative research (Bourdieu 1999: 614), this opportunity to talk

about experiences is especially valuable for people whose refugee experiences have produced high levels of distrust (Hynes 2003), and for young people in the settlement context in which practical processes frequently take precedence over psychosocial needs. Those participants who expressed reluctance to disclose personal information to co-ethnic peers due to concerns about the circulation of gossip in their ethnic communities, as well as those who did not have close familial or friendship ties, were particularly attuned to the exceptional space offered by the project. One Sudanese young woman, whose lack of close family in Australia and distrust of her co-ethnics made her particularly isolated, said in her wave five interview:

‘It’s good because you have to talk about your feeling, which is good. Someone has to be there and listen to you, what you’re saying. That’s a really big deal, you know.’

The researchers were aware that the professional and ethical parameters of clinical practice were not in place. Accordingly, the potential ‘therapeutic’ benefit of participation needed to be treated with caution, with awareness of the impacts of data collection and ‘disclosure’ for participant’s privacy and wellbeing, and careful consideration of how to address participants’ requests for advice (see Thomson and Holland 2003). The first four waves of data collection were conducted as a research collaboration with Foundation House, a service offering torture and trauma counselling to resettled refugees. A protocol was established to refer participants to Foundation House counsellors if they requested psychological help. There were also protocols to refer participants to other services should they be requested such as health and family planning, homework programmes etc. Further, contact between the researchers and each participant was typically annual and structured, and researchers did not engage in the everyday lives and decisions of participants. Participants also worked with a number of different researchers, so that multiple and more diffuse personal interactions occurred. Finally, there was a clear end-point after wave four of the initial project, including evaluation questions and a certificate of completion. It was explained that the wave five interview was a one-off follow up. In this way, we attempted to ensure that the research relationship was not misrepresented. While the study aimed to support positive settlement experience, the researchers sought to maintain realistic expectations about the research and the interpersonal relationships formed between researchers and participants. Participants’ expectations of the project, their concerns and motivations for participating, and the researcher-participant relationship were openly declared and negotiated over the duration of the project (see also MacKenzie et al. 2007).

Rather than striving for disengaged objectivity, the study was designed to positively contribute to the experiences of participants, particularly through the creation of a Settlement Journal which included questionnaires, drawings, photographs and written responses, and which participants kept as a document of their early years of settlement in Australia (Gifford 2013b: 288). During wave five of data collection, the personal value of the journal was reflected in the high number of participants (at least half) who reported that

they had kept them, and participants' comments about its impacts: producing self-knowledge through encouraging reflections on past experiences and thinking about the future; capturing change over time in participants' ideas, experiences, and aspirations; measuring their progress in relation to previous goals; and producing a record of early settlement. Several participants spoke of the value of the journal:

To not forget myself, how I was, who I was, but how the changes come up. (Afghan young man)

I guess it did make it different in a way. Like doing things like...thinking of my future and what I would hopefully be in a few years' time. It got me thinking... It really help[s] to have something that you can look back and say, "I did this before, I remember wanting to do this," and then you think, "Have I done that? What steps do I need to take to get there?" (Sudanese young woman)

The ongoing value of the journal also became apparent when on numerous occasions participants' drawings – utilised by the wave five researcher to anchor discussion – were shared during interviews with participants' parents, younger relatives, and children, triggering much laughter and discussion.

Yet, it was not just the personal benefits yielded from the research relationship that were noted by participants, but also what they, in turn, offered. An important component of the project for some participants was the opportunity to actively contribute to a process rather than being positioned as the recipient of services: the dominant relationship that most refugees have with the host society during early settlement. Reflecting on the first phase of the study, a young Eritrean man, Senay, told us, 'I guess I felt significant, I was part of a survey, I was a part of something bigger than me, so it did feel good'; Zoran, a Serbian young man, found it 'a pleasure being part of the Good Start project knowing that the research that we did may help new arrivals get along easier in new society'.

Overall, the study appears to have offered a variety of positive experiences and outcomes that contributed to participants' experiences in Australia. Importantly, in creating a safe space to communicate ideas and experiences, reflect on the past, and consider the future, it provided opportunities and forms of support not available, or not accessed, through conventional programs and services. This longitudinal study models an alternative form of reciprocity in the research relationship: one that is not predicated on remuneration or on the presumption of direct benefits to participants emanating from project findings, but through supporting, albeit modestly, their experiences of settlement in ways that differently affect participants based on their interests and needs. While human research ethics committees and researchers are rightly concerned about the impositions, risks and vulnerabilities associated with research participation, this study also points to benefits and positive experiences associated with participation.

Evidence for Policy and Practice?

Finally, a key value of research into refugee settlement is its relevance and use for policy makers and service providers (Jacobsen and Landau 2003). Longitudinal research is particularly important because it can provide insights into the changing nature of the challenges and opportunities of refugee settlement over time (Beiser 2006). Taking account of the temporal dimension of settlement among refugee background youth is important both because of the developmental- and life-stages that youth pass through on their way to adulthood and because of the different tasks in early settlement (e.g. learning the language, becoming familiar with the education system) as compared to the later years (e.g. entering higher education, finding a job, starting a family). This is where longitudinal research has real potential as it takes account of changing life stages, settlement stages and specific social and policy contexts. A critical concern for this longitudinal study was to produce timely and policy/practice-relevant 'evidence' in the dynamic context of Australia's humanitarian settlement program.

A key advantage of the study was that the first four years of the research were conducted in partnership with Foundation House, a non-government organization that provides refugee mental health and support services (the industry partner). This enabled the researchers to disseminate and discuss preliminary findings with service providers and policy makers as the study progressed. Second, in addition to academic publications, policy broadsheets were produced on specific issues as they arose, and these were distributed widely via email and the World Wide Web (see for example Refugee Health Research Centre 2007). The broadsheets reported preliminary findings on issues of specific interest to the refugee youth settlement sector including education, discrimination, sexual health and relationships with the police. One draw-back of longitudinal research, however, is that data collection, analysis and outcomes take time. A particular challenge for this study was to address the demand to produce an 'evidence-base' for policy, projects and tenders in the shorter term (Boswell 2012). The scale and methodological diversity of the data-set created a tension between understanding complexities over various waves of data collection, and producing clear and policy-relevant findings in the shorter-term. Indeed, one problem for longitudinal research is 'the absence of analytical closure' with each round of data collection necessitating new interpretation and analysis (Thomson and Holland 2003: 243). Although there is no guarantee that research evidence will be taken up by policy (Marmot 2004), the longitudinal nature of this study made the delivery of timely evidence difficult.

Conclusion

Through using longitudinal methods, detailed understanding can be developed of refugee settlement over time, experiences of transition, and meaning-making. Temporality is

explicitly addressed in the research process, making change over time a central domain of analytic focus (Thomson and Holland 2003). The longitudinal study discussed here explored the contexts and processes that influence settlement and wellbeing among a cohort of young people from refugee backgrounds in Australia. In this article, we have paid specific attention to methodological and ethical issues associated with the longitudinal approach. As Jacobsen and Landau argue, the 'field' of refugee studies requires more detailed and transparent discussion of research methods, and this will strengthen the ability to provide evidence that is sufficiently robust to advocate for, critique or support policy that relates to the "world's displaced" (2003: 202).

First, we highlighted the importance of building participants' sense of engagement and commitment to the project through diverse methods, and of retaining detailed contact details in order to support efforts to recontact and retain participants over time. These processes of participant engagement and retention were carefully balanced with efforts to ensure that consent was negotiated iteratively and that participants had some control over the conditions of their involvement. Second, we discussed methodological areas of learning associated with the longitudinal design: both the age of the cohort and the dynamic settlement context required reorientation of some research tools over time, as well as responsiveness to the changing abilities, interests, experiences and preferences for expression among the refugee cohort. This methodological responsiveness made for more meaningful data collection for both participants and researchers. Third, participants' accounts of their experience of the study highlighted the value of their long-term engagement with the project; not only what they gained, but also what they contributed, including the hope that their participation would lead to applied insights that assist future 'new arrivals'. This indicates that as well providing reciprocal benefits and strengthening the capacities of the refugee cohort, as advocated by Mackenzie et al. (2007), participants valued the opportunity to contribute to a research process which they regarded as having broader social benefit. Indeed, research with refugee populations has an imperative to be relevant for policy and practice (Block et al. 2012). However, while longitudinal research is a valuable means of examining dynamic and long-term experiences of refugee displacement and settlement, evidence to critique or support policy cannot be rapidly produced and contradictory experiences can emerge that call into question definitive conclusions (particularly with qualitative and mixed-method longitudinal approaches). The immediate demand for policy relevant evidence is a challenge for any longitudinal study, and all the more so for this project engaging with the complex social issues of refugee youth settlement.

While the focus of this article has been longitudinal methods, the central themes presented here intersect with wider discussion of the responsibilities and demands associated with research involving people from refugee backgrounds and other marginalised populations (c.f. Block et al. 2012; Jacobsen and Landau 2003). There is no 'gold standard' method that

will ensure that refugee-focused research is methodologically rigorous, scientifically sound, ethically responsible, and policy relevant; rather a rigorous ethical and methodological reflexivity is required of all research. In this paper, we have considered both central lessons that emerge from the perspective of the researchers, and the reflections of participants' themselves on the research process. It is important to continue to discuss and debate innovative research approaches that seek to understand refugee displacement and settlement.

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